DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 348 201 RC 018 909

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TITLE Using Literature by American Indians and Alaska Natives in Secondary Schools. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-RC-92-6
PUB DATE Sep 92
CONTRACT RI88062016
NOTE 3p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/CRESS, Appalachia Educational Laboratory, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325 (free).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alaska Natives; American Indian Culture; American Indian History; *American Indian Literature; American Indians; *Cultural Education; *Ethnic Stereotypes; *Multicultural Education; Racial Bias; Secondary Education; Social Attitudes; Social Integration
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests; Literary Canon

ABSTRACT

Literature is a powerful vehicle for the transmission and interpretation of culture. Reading a variety of literature helps students to understand the principles underpinning values and traditions of their own culture and the cultures of others. Studying the myths, legends, and songs of traditional Native literature helps readers understand contemporary Native literature and appreciate its differences from the mainstream. However, the accepted canons of literature exclude works by American Indians and Alaska Natives. Furthermore, the few literary works about Native Americans that have secured a place in the secondary school curriculum were written by non-Natives, are unauthentic, portray cultural information inaccurately, and perpetuate negative stereotypes. Over the centuries, the stereotypical Native American in literature has shifted from simple, superstitious child of God to blood-thirsty savage to noble savage to victimized dispossessed nomad. Non-Native writers today continue to portray Native people as the "other" when they acknowledge their existence at all. It is only by creating and widely circulating their own literature that Native peoples can become a part of the American "ourness" and take their rightful place in the American literary canon. It is time for secondary schools to introduce their students to the growing body of Native literature. This digest contains 17 references and suggested readings for secondary students. (SV)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools September 1992

Using Literature by American Indians and Alaska Natives in Secondary Schools

by Agnes Grant and LaVina Gillespie

Digest EDO-RC-92-6

THIS DIGEST DESCRIBES the relationship between literature and culture and shows the significance for students who read a variety of literature about their own and other cultures. No aspect of American society, however, excludes American Indians and Alaska Natives more completely than the accepted canons of literature. The Digest describes the resulting loss for American culture, but also discusses the development of literature by Native writers. It explains why literature written **about** Native Americans can never take the place of literature written **by** Native writers.

Literature and Culture

Literature is a powerful vehicle for the transmission and interpretation of a culture (Grant, 1986). Literature can combine knowledge and feelings in ways different from other disciplines such as art and music. People of all ages need to read a variety of literature to help them understand the principles underpinning the values and traditions of their own culture and the cultures of others.

Artistic expression can be conceived, in part, as an attempt to transform "otherness" into "ourness" (Grant, 1986). Studying the vivid and compelling myths, legends, and songs of *traditional* Native literature helps readers understand *contemporary* Native literature and appreciate its differences from the mainstream. Two invaluable books for helping secondary school teachers lead students through such subject matter are Lerner's *Dancing on the Rim of the World* (1990) and Silko's *Ceremony* (1977).

Literature that portrays American Indian people as an integral part of the United States—transforming "otherness" into "ourness"—is a relatively recent phenomenon. Too often, the few examples that have secured a place in the secondary school curriculum are inauthentic, portraying cultural information inaccurately. By and large, books about American Indians and Alaska Natives written by people from outside the culture are still viewed as the best interpretation of Native cultures.

Stereotypes About American Indians and Alaska Natives in Literature

Much of the literature about Native Americans written by non-Natives has perpetuated negative stereotypes. Unfortunately, many secondary students and even Native people themselves have come to believe the stereotypes.

The earliest stereotypes came from explorers and missionaries who portrayed Native populations as uncivilized, simple, superstitious, and innocent children of God, ripe for conversion and, above all, dependent on colonizers and missionaries. Indians have long been portrayed as incapable of metaphysical thought and as inarticulate, communicating by saying "Ugh" or "How." These stereotypes were maintained despite early Jesuit missionary reports demonstrating that Indian people had a sophisticated belief system. One story recorded by a Jesuit in 1645 tells of a 70-year-old Huron who was told that God had no pity on him because He allowed a stroke to deprive the old man of the use of his arm. He replied, "What! Would you wish that there were no dried trees in the woods and no dead branches on a tree that is growing old?" (Petrone, 1983, p. 11).

As the body of literature about Indians grew, the paternalistic representation of Indians was generally adopted by other writers. This stereotype changed as European rivalries over land were brought to North America. No longer perceived as childlike children of God, the Indians became "blood-thirsty savages," greatly feared by enemies.

The horrors of the Indian wars fought to secure the continent for White settlers are not well documented from the Indian perspective. A biography of Daniel Boone, the notorious Indian fighter, demonstrates how dehumanized Native people were in Euro-American accounts:

> Now we shot them like dogs, and then set the house on fire and burned it up with 46 warriors in it. I recollect seeing a boy who was shot near the house. His arm and thigh were broken and he was so near the burning house that the grease was streaming out of him. In this situation he was still trying to crawl along, but no murmur escaped him though he was only twelve years old. So sullen is the Indian when his dander is up that he had sooner die than make a noise or ask for mercy (Daugherty, 1940, p. 24).

With the end of the wars, frontiers were opened for White settlement. Native people were no longer needed for trade or wars, thus they became irrelevant to mainstream society except when they occupied coveted land. Colonization all over the world at this time was leading to the destruction of Native, or "aboriginal," lifestyles. Philosophers like Hobbes and Rousseau expressed concern over this wanton destruction. They romanticized the image of aborigines, depicting them as "noble savages" who once lived in perfect harmony with nature. An Aborigines Protection Association was formed in the late 1800s and efforts were made to assist aboriginal people.

There is hardly a trace of what this time was like for American Indians that is recorded in their own words. A few Christianized Natives left records. They worked largely for the Protestant churches and traveled widely to raise funds. Though exploited as curios by the churches, they left valuable records of their impressions of the times. One example is George Henry, who traveled in the United States and Europe. He described Queen Victoria's mustached guards as

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looking "fierce and savage like our American dogs when carrying black squirrels in their mouths" (Petrone, 1983, p. 88).

The final phase in the subjugation of American Indians was to place them on reservations where, it was hoped, they would lapse into obscurity. A few Native writers recorded their observations of these times, but their work was not acknowledged as important, and is now generally out of print. There is a movement to reprint the works of some of these writers. An example is *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* by Morning Dove (1927, 1981).

The most recent stereotype arose about a hundred years after Indians were placed on reservations. As concern grew for civil rights, equal opportunity, and other social issues during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, American Indians and Alaska Natives again received the attention of creative artists and writers. A new stereotype surfaced, as destructive as all the others. It is the view of Native Americans as victimized, dispossessed nomads, without culture and unable to cope in either the traditional world or in the world of assimilation and integration.

Breaking the Stereotype

The importance of American Indian and Alaska Native literature is revealed when Natives tell their own stories unvarnished by non-Indian interpretation. Some excellent examples of this sort of expression are currently available to secondary teachers (see suggested reading list). In these works, readers learn that the rugged individualism of the American frontier is antithetical to the sense of community in Native societies. Picaresque heroes exist in Indian writing, but have trickster-like qualities. A sense of alienation from society is often strong, but there is healing (Grant, 1986). The quest theme leads back home to one's roots where elders wait to teach Native ways to the young who may be floundering in alien cultures or questioning traditional ways. The writing style is often influenced by the aesthetically powerful oral narrative from which it springs. The shape and content of myths and legends influence what contemporary writers say. Visions and dreams play a vital role in the lives of traditional Natives and their influences are felt in contemporary writing.

Like all culture, Native culture is not static. Native writing, as an expression of Native culture, likewise continues to develop. Some writers tell stories in traditional, oral narrative style like their elders do; others write in a purely Westernized style like E. Pauline Johnson (1913, 1987) in *The Moccasin Maker*. In short, Native literature entertains, instructs, and speaks to audiences in ways other literatures seldom do.

Conclusion

Non-Native writers today continue to portray Native people as "other" when they acknowledge their existence at all. It is only by creating and widely circulating their own literature that Native peoples can become a part of the American "ourness," and thus take their rightful place in the American literary canon. Native writers have been engaged in this work for some time, and have made many excellent offerings. It is time for secondary schools to take note and introduce their students to this body of work and make the ongoing presence of Native Americans visible to a new generation of students.

References

Daugherty, J. (1940). *Daniel Boone*. New York: Viking.

Grant, A. (1986). *Monographs in education: Native literature in the curriculum*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba.

Johnson, E. P. (1987). *The moccasin maker*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. (Original work published 1913.)

Lerner, A. (Ed.). (1990). *Dancing on the rim of the world: An anthology of contemporary Northwest Native American writing*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Morning Dove. (1981). *Cogewea, the half-blood*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. (Original work published 1927.)

Petrone, P. (1983). *First people, first voices*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Silko, L. M. (1977). *Ceremony*. New York: Viking Press.

Suggested Reading List

Culleton, B. (1983). *In search of April Raintree*. Winnipeg: Pemmican.
A moving novel of two sisters, victimized by an uncaring social service system, as they search for lost identities. (Metis). Grades 9-12.

Geiogamah, H. (1980). *New Native American drama: Three plays*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
A compelling set of plays told from an Indian viewpoint. These plays will give Anglo readers a small glimpse into the reality of Native American life. (Kiowa). Grades 11-12.

George, J. C. (1972). *Julie of the wolves*. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside Ltd.
An adventure story set in the Arctic that will excite even the most lethargic reader. (Eskimo). Grades 7-9.

Grant, A. (Ed.). (1990). *Our bit of truth: An anthology of Canadian Native literature*. Winnipeg: Pemmican.
A showcase of Aboriginal writing: myths, legends, traditional and contemporary poetry, biography, autobiography, memoirs, short stories, and excerpts of novels. Grades 7-12.

Momaday, N. S. (1960). *The way to Rainy Mountain*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico.
A unique blend of myth, legend, history, and personal experience. (Kiowa). Grade 12.

Penoi, C. R. (1987). *Indian time*. Yukon, OK: Pueblo Publishing.
A delightful, fast-moving romance that keeps the reader entertained throughout the entire reading. Grades 10-12.

Rockwood, J. (1975). *Long Man's song*. New York: Dell.
Anthropological information is woven into a suspenseful novel of pre-Columbian times. (Cherokee). Grades 9-12.

Silko, L. M. (1981). *The storyteller*. New York: Arcade.
A valuable collection of poetry and stories handed down from the oral tradition. (Laguna). Grades 10-12.

Slipperjack, R. (1989). *Honour the sun*. Winnipeg: Pemmican.
A compelling novel full of anguish and grief, yet touched by the sensitivity and joy of life only Indian novelists can portray. (Ojibway). Grades 9-10.

Welch, J. (1990). *The Indian lawyer*. New York: Pemmican.
Like a true storyteller, Welch weaves metaphor with reality in this poignant novel about Native Americans and the penal system. (Blackfeet). Grades 11-12.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RI-88-062016. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the Department of Education.

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